BBC tv TIME-LIFE BOOKS 25p
98 Weekly parts No. 19

# THE BRITISH EMPIRE

## Disaster avenged in INDIA'S NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

South Africa 70c Canada 95c

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98 Weekly parts No. 19

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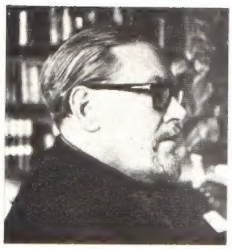

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## BY THE WAY

From now on, this space will occasionally be given over to a column open for discussion on any subject of relevance to imperial history and to this publication.

Readers will be able to praise or censure. We will tell of the problems – some serious, some amusing – of working on the history. We will be able to mention places or books of special interest.

The Empire is still highly controversial; those who devoted themselves to its service, those who laugh at it or revile it, those who were subject to its rule – all will have strong opinions to express. These – and the problems of accommodating them within a general historical account – can be aired here.

Some of the subjects to be raised will be light-hearted. Every member of the editorial team, for instance, has a favourite anecdote. One of our staff writers, while attempting to catalogue the thousands of islands, islets – and even single rocks – that have ever been British, unearthed a 19th-Century Colonial Office list which mentioned two islands with the unlikely names of Roast Beef and Plum Pudding. It came as no surprise when we were totally unable to trace them. Had some official taken seriously a captain's jest scribbled down after a Christmas meal of roast beef and plum pudding? Or do they really exist somewhere? Or did they once exist, and have now mysteriously vanished? Can anyone help?

This week's issue on the North-West Frontier retells one of the most staggering tales in imperial history: the retreat from Afghanistan in which 16,000 people perished and only one man completed the journey. We reprint extracts from the diary of Lady Sale, who endured the retreat until being taken hostage. The full diary, well worth reading, is available in many libraries; its title is *Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan*. A new edition has recently been published, edited by Patrick Macrory, who is also the author of another book *A Signal Catastrophe*, a history of the retreat.

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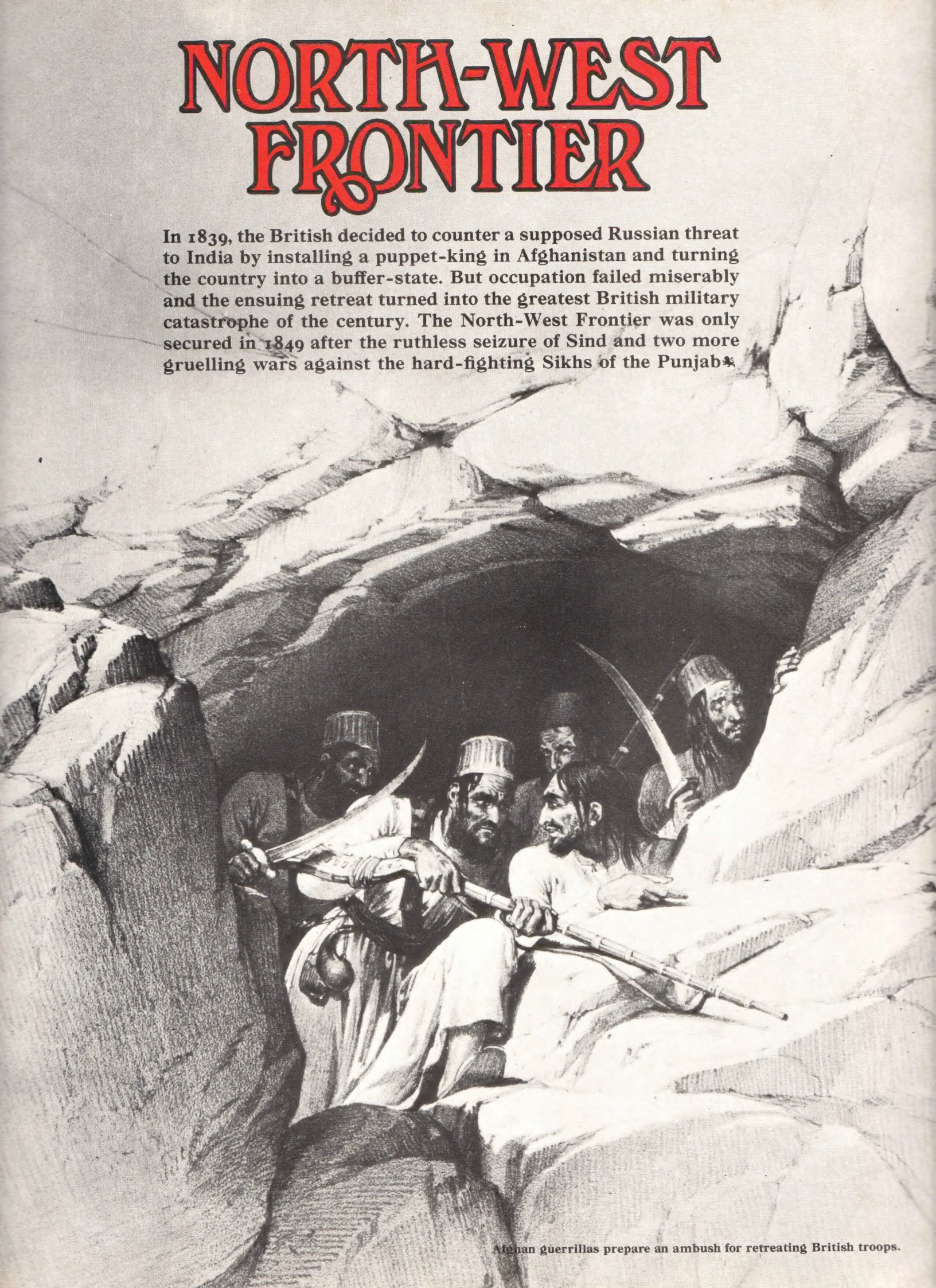
**Cover:** At the Battle of Sobraon in 1846, the British defeated the Sikhs after a bloody, three-month war and occupied the Sikh kingdom, the Punjab.

# NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

**In 1839, the British decided to counter a supposed Russian threat to India by installing a puppet-king in Afghanistan and turning the country into a buffer-state. But occupation failed miserably and the ensuing retreat turned into the greatest British military catastrophe of the century. The North-West Frontier was only secured in 1849 after the ruthless seizure of Sind and two more gruelling wars against the hard-fighting Sikhs of the Punjab.**



Afghan guerrillas prepare an ambush for retreating British troops.

## By Michael Edwardes

In the early 19th-Century Russia was advancing southwards in central Asia. In London and Calcutta, the irrational fear grew that Russian troops might one day seize Britain's Indian Empire. This fear, growing out of all proportion, led to one of the greatest disasters in the history of the Empire. In 1839, in a panic-stricken effort to protect the North-West Frontier against the supposed Russian threat, the British invaded Afghanistan – only to have 16,000 soldiers, dependents and camp-followers annihilated in the ensuing retreat.

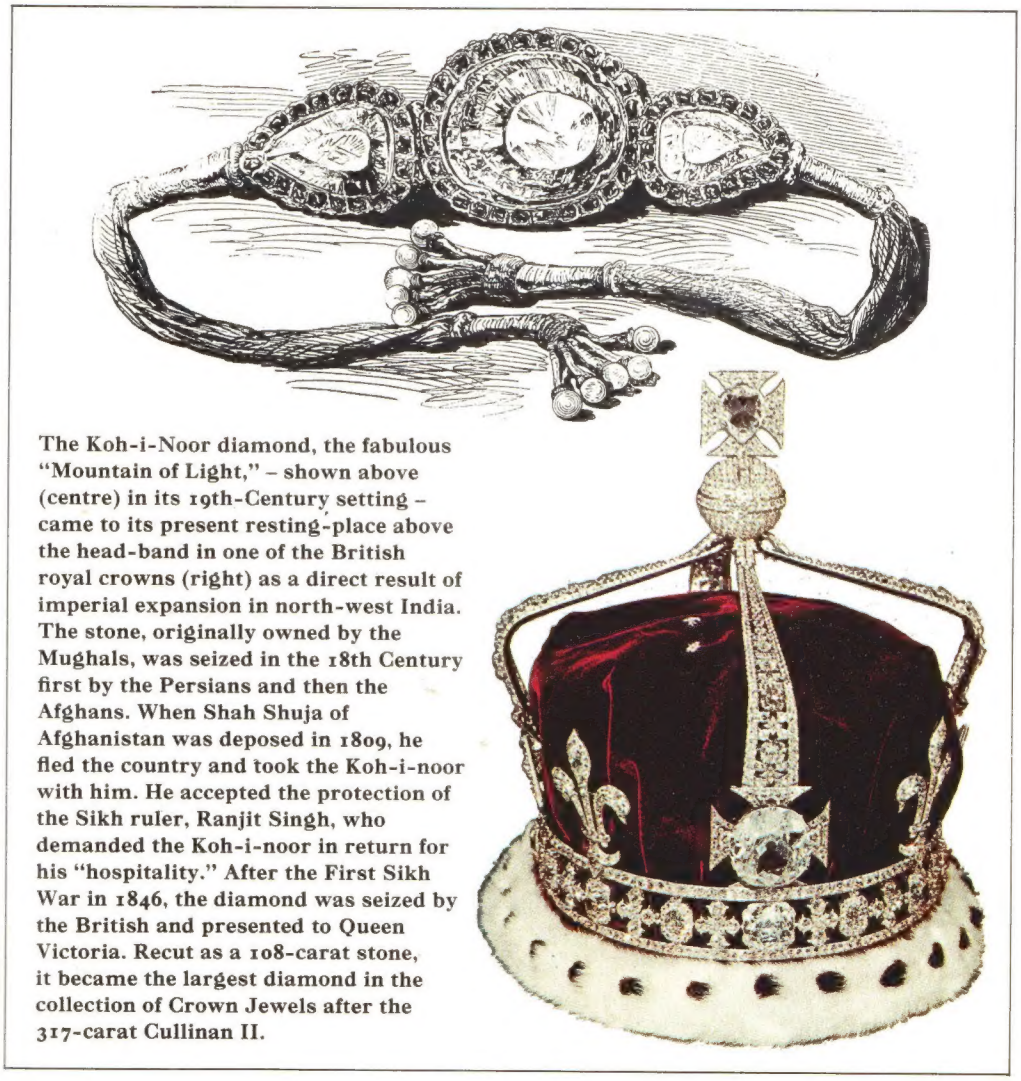
The need for revenge and security then led to a second invasion of Afghanistan and, within a few years, to the annexation of two other buffer states, the Sind and the Punjab. Security, first from the Russians and then from the Afghanis, was dearly bought: a legacy of hatred involved the British in a series of petty border wars against dissident tribesmen until well into the 20th Century.

By hindsight, British fears of Russia seem fantastic. Though some Russian generals may have dreamed of conquering India one day, they were a very long way off. The distance between the nearest Russian base in central Asia and the frontiers of British India was 2,000 miles, and in between lay the inhospitable terrain occupied by the independent kingdoms of Afghanistan and the Punjab.

For this reason, fear of Russia grew slowly at first. In the early years of the century, the view of sensible military strategists prevailed that, if the threat ever developed, it could best be met on the plains of northern India, near well-established bases, rather than in the wilds of central Asia.

This view was undermined when in 1826, Russia successfully attacked Persia and supplanted Britain as the dominant power in that country.

After his victory over Persia, the Russian commander spoke openly of a coming war with England, and British fears of Russian designs on India intensified. In London Lord Ellenborough – the minister responsible for the affairs of British India – believed that Russian forces could one day use Afghanistan as a base, for an advance into India. He assumed, however, that the Russians would first seek to establish influence with the ruler of Afghanistan and infiltrate the country. So Ellenborough reasoned that the situation in Afghanistan should be closely watched, especially as after almost 20 years of anarchy, a new ruler, Dost Muhammad, seemed about to bring peace to the country.



**The Koh-i-Noor diamond, the fabulous "Mountain of Light," – shown above (centre) in its 19th-Century setting – came to its present resting-place above the head-band in one of the British royal crowns (right) as a direct result of imperial expansion in north-west India. The stone, originally owned by the Mughals, was seized in the 18th Century first by the Persians and then the Afghans. When Shah Shuja of Afghanistan was deposed in 1809, he fled the country and took the Koh-i-noor with him. He accepted the protection of the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh, who demanded the Koh-i-noor in return for his "hospitality." After the First Sikh War in 1846, the diamond was seized by the British and presented to Queen Victoria. Recut as a 108-carat stone, it became the largest diamond in the collection of Crown Jewels after the 317-carat Cullinan II.**

The anarchy had begun in 1809 with the overthrow of Shah Shuja. When he left Afghanistan, Shuja had accepted a pressing invitation from the Sikh ruler of neighbouring Punjab, Ranjit Singh, to join him at Lahore. Shuja believed that Ranjit was prepared to help him back to power; instead he and his family were put under guard and kept without food until he gave up the celebrated diamond known as the "Koh-i-noor," or "Mountain of Light," which he had brought with him. It was not until 1816 that Shuja was able to escape from Ranjit's "hospitality" to the British frontier town of Ludhiana, where he was given a house and granted a small pension. For some years, the British gave Shuja no further help, nor even any encouragement, in his ambitions. But by the early 1830s, with the apparent growth of the Russian threat, some Englishmen had suggested that the British should help Shuja back to power and use him as a puppet ruler to secure the frontier against a possible invasion.

Other British theorists, however, believed that their country's interests would best be served by building up the new Afghan ruler, Dost Muhammad. Among those who supported Dost Muhammad and considered Shah Shuja a spent force

was Alexander Burnes, a former soldier in the East India Company's army, whose flair for languages and enterprising travels in remote areas had won him promotion into the Foreign and Political Department. In 1831, when only 26 years old, he had been sent on an intelligence mission to Ranjit Singh in the Punjab.

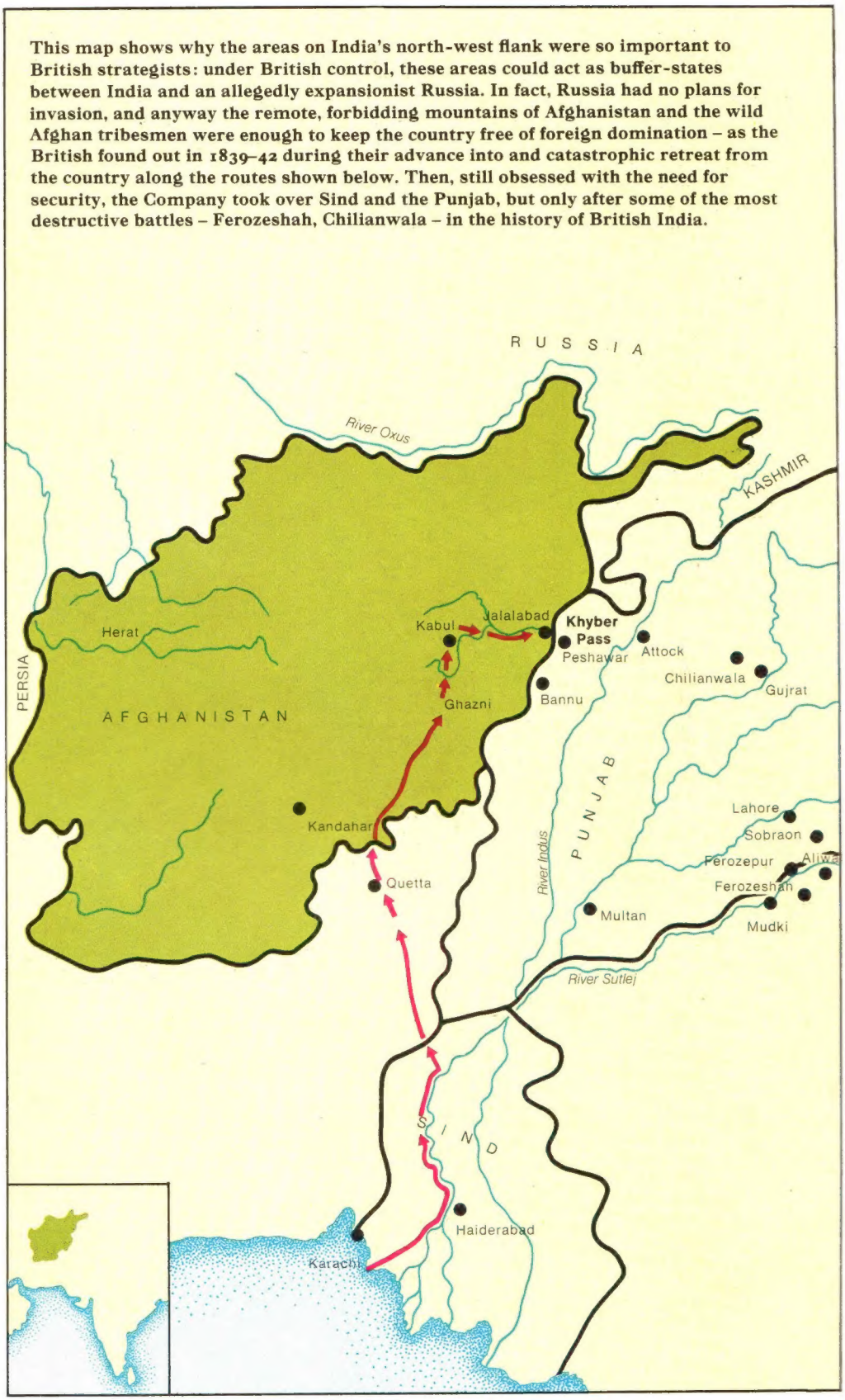
Burnes carried out his mission, and arrived back in British India at Ludhiana. There he met Shah Shuja, still dreaming of a return to Afghanistan. Burnes was not impressed. "From what I learn," he wrote, "I do not believe the Shah possesses sufficient energy to seat himself on the throne of Kabul; and that if he did regain it, he has not the tact to discharge the duties of so difficult a situation." This opinion he conveyed to the then Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, when he reported to him at Simla.

At this meeting, Burnes also obtained permission, and encouragement, to make an epic journey through central Asia, including Afghanistan, an itinerary which gave him the opportunity to meet Dost Muhammad. In Kabul, on his way to Bokhara, Samarkand and Persia, he was welcomed by Dost Muhammad and was greatly impressed by the personality of the Afghan ruler. This was the man, Burnes was convinced, whom the British should support, not the wretched Shah Shuja. The Governor-General seems to have shared Burnes's opinion, Bentinck refused to help Shah Shuja in an abortive attempt to regain the throne.

Without British assistance, Shah Shuja was reluctantly compelled to turn to his former "host" Ranjit Singh, and in March, 1833, a treaty was signed between the two. Shuja, with a small force, slowly made his way into Afghanistan towards Kandahar, only to be ignominiously chased away by Dost Muhammad. Ranjit Singh occupied the Afghan town of Peshawar, which was what he had intended all the time, and Shah Shuja crept back to the security of Ludhiana.

The next two years saw the scene being set for a terrible drama. In 1834, a new ruler, Mohammed Shah, succeeded to the throne of Persia. His ambitions were enlarged by his Russian advisers. In particular, he was encouraged in his desire to occupy the town of Herat on the western borders of Afghanistan. This was

**This map shows why the areas on India's north-west flank were so important to British strategists: under British control, these areas could act as buffer-states between India and an allegedly expansionist Russia. In fact, Russia had no plans for invasion, and anyway the remote, forbidding mountains of Afghanistan and the wild Afghan tribesmen were enough to keep the country free of foreign domination – as the British found out in 1839–42 during their advance into and catastrophic retreat from the country along the routes shown below. Then, still obsessed with the need for security, the Company took over Sind and the Punjab, but only after some of the most destructive battles – Ferozeshah, Chilianwala – in the history of British India.**



to be the prelude, it was openly said, to the conquest of other Afghan towns. Naturally, the news was not well received in London, and the British Minister at the Persian Court was instructed "especially to warn the Persian government against allowing themselves to be pushed on to make war against the Afghans." The ruler's reaction, which was one of polite indifference, added to the sense of unease in London, which the British Foreign Minister, Lord Palmerston, did not fail to convey to the new Governor-General, Lord Auckland, before his departure for India. It was clear that great events of some kind were taking place in central Asia and that it would be wise for the government of India to know more about them. Officials were instructed to collect geographical and political intelligence, and as part of this policy a British Commercial Envoy was to be sent to the Afghan capital at Kabul.

The assignment was given to Alexander Burnes, who had become famous after the publication in 1834 of a description of his travels. In London he was acknowledged to be the greatest authority on the affairs of central Asia. No wonder he returned to India convinced that his future was assured – if he did nothing that would antagonize the men in power.

Not everyone in India, however, held a high opinion of Burnes, and some of his critics were in a position to influence the Governor-General. In particular there was the ambitious, influential William Hay Macnaghten, head of the Foreign and Political Department of the government of India.

Like Burnes, Macnaghten had started life as an officer in the Company's army, but had quickly exchanged the sword for the pen. He was a brilliant linguist, but also a confirmed bureaucrat who avoided the dangers and excitement of travel in harsh India. The contrast between Macnaghten and Burnes was profound – Macnaghten cold, delighting in intrigue for its own sake, "dry as an old nut," as a contemporary put it; and Burnes, an almost Byronic figure, enjoying himself in native dress and with native women, seeing tragedy in the making and yet taking no action to avert it. All the two men were to have in common was the horror and futility of their deaths.

Burnes's mission to Kabul was not supposed to be political, merely commercial, but neither Burnes nor Dost Muhammad acknowledged the restriction. Burnes had, in fact, no authority to offer Dost Muhammad anything. To the ruler's request for British help in regaining Peshawar from the Sikhs, he could only give vague and unsatisfying answers. He wrote to Macnaghten for instructions. Dost Muhammad wanted an alliance, he said, and if he did not get it he would undoubtedly turn to the Persians and the Russians. There was news that a Persian army with Russian advisers was on its way to seize Herat and that a Russian who was supposedly a diplomatic envoy would be arriving at Kabul. Macnaghten replied only with a refusal to do anything about Peshawar, and a warning to Dost Muhammad not to enter into alliances with any other states.

Burnes took the hint. In trying to persuade the government of India that

**Shah Shuja, the inept and penniless former King of Afghanistan, had been living on a British pension for 30 years when the British decided in 1839 to drag him out of obscurity and reinstate him.**

**Dost Muhammad, who clawed his way to the Afghan throne in 1826, was well respected and authoritative – far more worthy of support, some East India Company officials argued, than the weak Shah Shuja.**

it must support Dost Muhammad, he might be prejudicing his own future. It was obvious that Auckland and his advisers had taken the arrival of the Russian "envoy" in Kabul – and his friendly reception by the Afghans – as a threat and decided that British interests could only be protected by violent action. In April, 1838, after a stay of seven months, Burnes left Kabul for India, convinced that the reception given to the Russian had been designed only to bring pressure on the British. In June, 1838, when Auckland asked for his views, Burnes replied that he still regarded Dost Muhammad as "a man of undoubted ability: and if half you do for others were done for him . . . he would abandon Persia and Russia tomorrow." But in the same letter he protected his flanks by saying that if the British government was contemplating replacing Dost Muhammad, it had "only to send Shuja to Peshawar with an agent and two of its regiments, as honorary escort, and an avowal to the Afghans that we have taken up his cause to ensure his being fixed forever on the Throne." It was exactly what Auckland and Macnaghten wanted to hear – and Burnes obviously knew it.

**Alexander "Bokhara" Burnes, renowned explorer of central Asia, failed to win British support for Dost Muhammad and became Resident in Kabul under Shuja.**

**Sir William Macnaghten, a sharp-nosed bureaucrat who reviled Burnes for backing Dost Muhammad, was the driving force behind the British invasion.**

The Persian advance on Herat and the arrival in Kabul of the alleged Russian diplomat had been received in London and Calcutta with hysteria. The British Ambassador to Russia had been instructed to ask for an explanation for the presence of a Russian agent in Kabul. The Russians denied all knowledge of his existence, and it seems likely that the man who had announced himself to Dost Muhammad as an Envoy had no official standing whatever. But it hardly mattered to Auckland, for by the time the Russian government's reply was received, he had already set out to place his own man on the throne of Afghanistan.

The plan was the sole responsibility of William Macnaghten – or so it was said after his death. Ranjit Singh of the Punjab would supply the men, the British the money and advisers, and the indefatigable Shah Shuja the figure-head.

A treaty between the three parties was signed in Lahore in June, 1838, but it soon became clear that Ranjit Singh had no intention of using Sikh forces to put Shuja back on his throne. The wily old man saw that Auckland had the bit between his teeth and that he could easily let the British fight the battles for him. He was right. Auckland, pushed on by Macnaghten, would not allow anything to interfere with his decision. In October, 1838, he issued a manifesto from Simla, in which his commitment was plainly stated. "His Majesty Shah Shuja will enter Afghanistan surrounded by his own troops and will be protected by a British army against foreign intervention and factious opposition."

While that army, grandiloquently called "the Army of the Indus," was being assembled, Auckland looked round to see who could be squeezed to pay for it. No one, it seemed, in British India. His eye fell on Sind, which adjoined the Punjab to the south. Its only connection with the British so far was through a treaty signed in 1832 that opened the Indus to commerce – but definitely not to armed vessels or military stores. Since Ranjit Singh, though an ally, would not even allow the Army of the Indus to march through his territory, it was decided the British should go through Sind and, on its way, bully the three Amirs of this disunited area into paying for the expedition. The treaty between the Amirs and the British was set aside "while the present exigency lasts."

The "present exigency" need not in fact have lasted at all. In September, after a campaign of almost incredible inefficiency, the Persians had given up the siege of Herat and marched away, and the supposed Russian Envoy had left Kabul. The two ostensible reasons for the venture had disappeared – but too late to change British plans.

The army started its march through Sind in December, 1838, devastating the countryside and looting at will until the Amirs gave in. With the army went William Macnaghten, now "Envoy and Minister on the part of the government of India at the court of Shah Shuja."

Through Sind, the going was slow but sure. Slow because, though there were only some 9,500 combat troops, there were over 38,000 camp-followers and 30,000 camels. The Company's army depended for its supplies on Indian contractors, and an army on the move was rather like a city of shops in tents which packed up each morning and reappeared each night. There were no sanitary arrangements, with the result that among the commodities delivered to the fighting

soldier were dysentery and cholera.

The commanders of the expedition were men who were mediocre even by the standards of the time. General Sir Willoughby Cotton never thought of sending out advance patrols, and of General Sir John Keane it was later said that the troops knew little of him, "and what little they did know did not fill them with any eager desire to place themselves under his command." Some of the junior officers were men of courage but little experience. A further burden on the army was the fact that its commanders only had authority in military matters. The real command of the expedition lay with Macnaghten, the Envoy, and with the other "politicals."

Despite arguments and disagreements between the military and the politicals, Kandahar, 70 miles inside the border and 300 from Kabul, was taken in April, 1839, and Shuja, accompanied by Macnaghten, entered the city in triumph. Though the latter's despatch to Lord Auckland claimed that the Shah had been received with "feelings nearly amounting to adoration," others would not have agreed. In fact, most of the population stayed away from the official installation of Shah Shuja as ruler of Afghanistan. Those chiefs who had come forward to support him had mainly been bought with lavish distributions of British gold.

The army had to move on against Kabul and Dost Muhammad, leaving General Sir William Nott to hold Kandahar. Cumbersome and diseased, it took two months to cover the 200 miles to the town of Ghazni. There the reception was somewhat different. The walls were defended. It was another month before a storming-party was able to enter the town after blowing the gates. The rest of the army followed and enjoyed itself in an orgy of loot and rape. Not to be outdone by his allies, Shuja had 50 prisoners hacked to death. Even in such a violent country as Afghanistan, this was noted and remembered.

The fall of Ghazni led, at least for the time being, to a withdrawal of support for Dost Muhammad. Macnaghten's generous bribes were so effective that all that remained of Dost Muhammad's defiance was a row of abandoned cannon across the road to Kabul.

At last, in August, 1839, Shah Shuja and the British reached the walls of Kabul. Preparations were made for a ceremonial entry. Alexander Burnes, who had been allotted a number of minor roles in the expedition and was generally ignored by Macnaghten, unexpectedly found himself at the moment of Macnaghten's triumph invited to enter the city by the Envoy's side.

Surrounded perhaps a little too obviously by British bayonets, Shah Shuja, after 30 years of exile, rode towards the great fortress of the Bala Hissar. Resplendent with jewels and mounted upon a white horse, with Macnaghten on one side and Burnes on the other, both in blue and gold dress uniforms, the Shah entered the palace of his ancestors, breaking suddenly into "a paroxysm of childish delight."

There had been no signs of delight on the faces of his subjects. Macnaghten chose to see respect, but others more

**A line of abandoned cannon, all that remained of Dost Muhammad's army, revealed the dramatic effect on Afghan morale of the British advance.**

In Kabul's summer palace, Shuja sat on a marble throne in public view. But he was unpopular, ineffective and largely ignored by his people.

discerning observed only "stern and scowling looks." The populace seemed more interested in the Europeans than they were in their new ruler.

The news of the installation of his puppet reached Lord Auckland at Simla. Everyone congratulated him on his great foresight and statesmanship, embroidering their congratulations with balls and galas in his honour. A few voices could be heard asking the obvious question: "what next?", but nobody in authority appeared to hear them over the sound of congratulations. Even the death in Lahore of Ranjit Singh, the other "partner" in the Afghan enterprise, was noticed only for the horror of his barbaric obsequies, in which four of his widows and a number of female servants were burned alive on his funeral-pyre.

In Kabul, it was becoming increasingly obvious to Macnaghten that the British could not leave their protégé to himself. Gold had bought some sort of allegiance from many of the Afghan chiefs, but next to gold they respected power, and it was clear to all that Shah Shuja possessed none of his own. If the British wished to see their man remain on his throne they would have to stay there themselves.

Many Afghan girls, at first curious, like this one at a Kabul window, later proved remarkably accommodating to British officers.

The officers settled in rapidly, dissipating any remaining vestiges of popularity. Wives came up from India to join their menfolk, but the unmarried men discovered that Afghan women were remarkably pretty and, on the whole, willing to give their favours for cash. This angered the Afghans for, though keeping concubines was a common practice in Afghanistan, prostitution had been virtually unknown until the arrival of the free-spending British. Even more offensive to Afghan pride were affairs between British soldiers and Afghan married women. In one case, a cuckolded husband punished his wife by killing her. This was, in Afghan terms, quite acceptable, but Shah Shuja, under pressure from Macnaghten, executed the man, an act that was widely resented.

On other levels, too, the British built up antagonism. The recklessness with which money was squandered by the occupying force soon drove prices high, and the poor of the city began to suffer. Christian missionaries came from India. Their activities inflamed Muslim religious fanaticism, as did the soldiers'

Akbar Khan, Dost Muhammad's son, was so impetuous, charming and good-looking that he quickly became a popular successor to his father as leader of the Afghan revolt.

often thoughtless defilement of shrines sacred to the Afghans.

However, during the autumn and winter of 1839 antagonism remained beneath the surface. When the government of India ordered economies, it was felt quite safe to allow some of the troops to return to India. Early in 1840, however, it was becoming plain that all was not as well as it should be. For all Macnaghten's optimism – and bribery – the chiefs had not come in from the countryside to offer their loyalty to Shah Shuja. Where there were British troops, the Shah ruled, but nowhere else.

The British politicals were not helping either. Inexperienced and often brash, they antagonized both Afghan officials and British military officers. General William Nott, commanding at Kandahar, caustically and with justice remarked that "the conduct of the thousand and one politicals has ruined our cause and bared the throat of every European in this country to the sword and knife of the revengeful Afghan." Nott may well have had in mind the actions of one political who destroyed a village of 23 people because "he thought they looked insultingly at him."

There was also the problem of Dost Muhammad, still at large despite efforts to capture him. Though frequently defeated, he always popped up again. "I am like a wooden spoon," he said. "You may throw me hither and thither, but I shall not be hurt." By September, 1840, Macnaghten was almost driven to distraction. Never, he claimed, had he been "so much harassed in body and mind. . . . The Afghans are gunpowder and the Dost is a lighted match."

Though he talked wildly of hanging the ex-Amir, he was more grateful than vengeful when the unpredictable Dost actually gave himself up. He had decided that in the face of overwhelming British presence, further resistance was useless and that a voluntary submission would leave his honour untarnished – especially as his son, Akbar Khan, would carry on the struggle. On a clear crisp morning in

**After a year as a guerrilla leader, Dost Muhammad, depressed by the strength of the British, unexpectedly accosted Macnaghten outside Kabul and gave himself up.**

November, Macnaghten on his evening ride outside Kabul was hailed by another horseman. Following behind was Dost Muhammad himself, elegantly dressed even though he had been in the saddle for a night and a day. Dismounting, he saluted the Envoy and offered his sword. Side by side the two men rode into the city. Ten days later, after regaling the British with the story of his life and adventures, the entertaining Dost was sent into India with a recommendation that he be well treated.

Auckland received him graciously and generously, awarding the fallen monarch a substantial pension. Seeing the wealth and luxury of British India for the first time, Dost Muhammad commented: "I cannot understand why the rulers of so great an empire should have gone across the Indus to deprive me of my poor and barren country." More and more Englishmen – especially those in Afghanistan – were beginning to agree with him.

All through 1841 the storm gathered. Macnaghten had been ordered to cancel the subsidies which kept at least some of the chiefs quiet, and they not unnaturally resented this loss of income. Powerful tribes were in revolt, now led by Dost Muhammad's son, Akbar Khan. Burnes, still ignored by the Envoy and living a separate life in his house deep in the city, heard news of rebellion and intrigue. He was quite convinced that disaster was at hand. Soldiers were attacked in the city streets, British officers out shooting were stoned by gangs of angry villagers. Rumours abounded of preparations for an attack on the hated foreigners and their puppet.

Yet no attempt was made to protect the British positions. On the contrary, at the request of Shah Shuja the British had vacated the great fortress of the Bala Hissar and built themselves a cantonment in an open plain, compounding this stupidity by siting their arsenal some considerable distance away.

To make matters even worse, a new general had taken over the command early in 1841 on the retirement of the elderly General Cotton. General Nott, the obvious candidate as his successor, was too independent and outspoken for Macnaghten's liking. The new general, William Elphinstone was so crippled with rheumatic gout that he was unlikely to resist Macnaghten.

Nor was there any other man with any dynamism. In October, General Sir Robert Sale and his brigade were ordered back to India as an economy measure. He departed, leaving behind in Kabul his daughter and his wife, who later wrote an astringent commentary on the campaign. Sale was instructed, on the way, to punish those tribes who, after the ending of the subsidies, had tried to close the roads out of Kabul. Sale found himself attacked instead. Halting in the Valley of Gandamak, he waited for news from Kabul. When it came, it was of a rising in the city; Sale and his brigade were instructed to retrace their steps. After consulting his officers, Sale decided to disobey Elphinstone's orders and make for Jalalabad.

For all the rumours of a coming revolt, the rising was a surprise to everyone, including Alexander Burnes, still in his house in the heart of the city. On November 1, there were strong indications that an attack was about to take place on Burnes's house. Burnes received warnings from at least two reliable sources. Instead of moving into the military cantonment which, for all its faults, was at least safer than the city, Burnes asked only that his guard be increased. Even at eight o'clock the next morning, with a mob at the gates calling for his death, Burnes's urgent message to Macnaghten suggesting that troops should be sent into the city also claimed that he could probably deal with the disturbance himself. But the situation was soon out of control. Burnes, courageous to the last, harangued the mob, offering money in return for safe-conduct, and was greeted with howls for blood. One of Burnes's British officers was immediately shot and the remainder, retreating into the house, prepared for defence and waited for relief from the cantonment. It never came.

The noise from the city could be heard by Macnaghten, Elphinstone and others as they argued about what should be done. Only the despised Shah Shuja acted, sending some of his own troops in a hopeless attempt to help Burnes. The mob, meanwhile, broke through the mud walls of the house and set the stables alight. Attempting to escape disguised as a native, Burnes was recognized and, with his brother John, hacked to pieces.

In the cantonment, muddle and inertia still reigned. The second-in-command, Brigadier John Shelton, a courageous but cantankerous man who had lost an

**The Afghans began their bloody vengeance on the British in November, 1842, by hacking to death Alexander Burnes who had remained in Kabul despite authentic reports of growing unrest.**

arm in the Peninsular War, was finally ordered by Macnaghten into the Bala Hissar – but not from there into the streets of Kabul. Seeing that the British were not moving on the city, the mob, which had been expecting an attack, began to plunder, murder and rape. Elphinstone's feeble response on that November evening was to write a note to Macnaghten: "We must see what the morning brings, and then think what can be done. . . ."

Elphinstone was too sick to command, but he would not give up his authority. Shelton, who having marched back to the cantonment might have called a conference of senior officers and taken command himself, confined himself to being rude to Elphinstone and doing as little as possible. Within a few days, Shelton was completely at loggerheads with Macnaghten as well.

News of the murder of Burnes and the immobility of the British spread rapidly throughout the country. Garrisons were attacked, columns massacred, and the chiefs began to move on Kabul where the British leaders collapsed into a total funk. Morale slumped. On one occasion a call for European volunteers to support some sepoys who were under attack produced just one Scottish private.

On November 13, the Afghans, now dominating the heights above the cantonment, swept down on the British lines outside Kabul. The charge was eventually thrown back, but the situation was clearly desperate. Most of the officers wanted to leave immediately for India. The occupation, wrote one young officer, was "a catalogue of errors, disasters, and difficulties, which following close on each other, disgusted our officers, disheartened our soldiers, and finally sunk us all into irretrievable ruin, as though Heaven itself . . . for its own inscrutable purposes, had planned our downfall."

In fact, it was clear that if the British were to save themselves, it would not be through superior military expertise. There was nothing for it but to make a deal. Forced into negotiation, Macnaghten fell back on his old methods: where guns had failed, gold and intrigue would certainly succeed.

On December 23, 1841, Macnaghten set out with a small escort to seal the bargain with Akbar Khan, Dost Muhammad's son, by which the British were to stay for eight months more and Akbar was to become chief minister. They met on the bank of the Kabul River, just a quarter of a mile from the cantonment. Macnaghten complained that there were too many Afghans crowding in. But Akbar answered: "They are all in the secret," and according to one who was present, "no sooner were these words uttered than I heard Akbar call out '*Beeger*' [seize] and turning around I saw him grasp the Envoy's hand with an expression of the most diabolical ferocity. The only words I heard poor Sir William utter were '*Az barae Khoda!*' [For God's sake!]. I saw his face, however. It was full of horror."

Macnaghten was shot by Akbar, in a struggle, with a pistol which the Envoy had given the Prince a few days before. Two of the British officers accompanying Macnaghten escaped, but another was cut down. Later, Macnaghten's headless body was displayed hanging from a pole that was set up in the Kabul bazaar.

As far as British morale was concerned, this was the last blow. Negotiations with Akbar Khan, now professing penitence, led to a curt treaty "to put away strife and contention and to avoid discord and enmity." The British were to go at once, leaving all their treasure and most of their artillery.

On January 6, 1842, the once-proud Army of the Indus marched out of Kabul for India. They had 90 miles of thick snow, freezing temperatures and high passes to cover before they reached the safety of Jalalabad, where Sale was firmly ensconced. If the Afghans proved treacherous, as many believed they would, there was little hope. The sensible suggestion of Macnaghten's successor, Eldred Pottinger, that the troops be equipped with sheepskin jackets and that they should bind their feet with rags as the Afghans did was rejected.

Some 4,500 fighting troops, hundreds of them sick and wounded, a large party of women and children, a vast quantity of baggage, and 12,000 panic-stricken camp-followers straggled out of the cantonment. As they left, the Afghans realized with glee that the British were too demoralized to prevent them indulging in plunder and murder. Before the rear-guard had left camp, 50 lay dead. Many of the camp-followers gave up almost at once, and sat apathetically by the roadside waiting for the relief of death from bullet or knife.

The column made barely six miles the first day. Looking back through the bitter darkness, the British saw their cantonments ablaze, set alight by the exultant Afghans. Most of the provisions had been thrown away by terrified servants. Lady Sale described the scene as the wretched force settled down for the night: "no tents, save one or two small palls. All scraped away the snow as best they could, to make a place to lie down. . . . No food for man or beast procurable." The rear-guard came in at two o'clock in the morning having fought all the way through "literally a continuous lane of poor wretches, men, women and children, dead or dying from the cold and wounds, who unable to move entreated their comrades to kill them and put an end to their misery."

Next morning the confusion was even worse. There was no order, wrote Lieutenant Vincent Eyre, only a "mingled mob of soldiers, camp-followers, and baggage cattle, preserving not even the faintest semblance of that regularity and discipline on which depended our only chance of escape from the dangers which threatened us." Ice formed on noses and moustaches. Horses' hooves had to be freed from lumps of frozen snow with hammers and chisels.

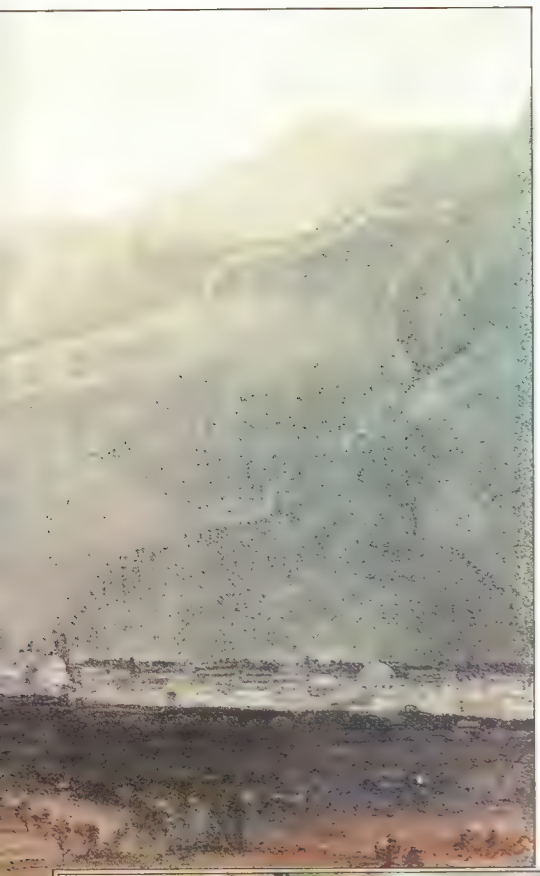
At the tail of the column, Afghan looters were at work again. As the column passed a small fort, a party swept out and captured a number of guns. Akbar, hovering in the distance, maintained the British had only themselves to blame by starting before food and firewood arrived for them. In the pathetic hope of receiving help from Akbar, a halt was called at midday, after only four miles had been covered. The second night, with the thermometer recording 40 degrees of frost, was far worse. Some of the sepoys even burned their useless tattered coats for a few minutes of warmth. "Perfectly paralysed with the cold," wrote Lady Sale in her entry for the grim day. "Snow still lies a foot deep on the ground. No food for man or beast; and even water from the river close at hand difficult to obtain, as our people were fired on in fetching it."

# RETREAT FROM KABUL

On January 6, 1842, a 4,000-strong British army and 12,000 camp-followers straggled out of Kabul. Ahead lay the rugged defiles (below) which led to Jalalabad 90 miles away. Within a week, bitter cold and vengeful Afghan tribesmen had turned the retreat into one gigantic death march.

Afghans push a cannon into position on a hill overlooking the exposed British cantonments, which the soldiers named the "Folly on the Plain."

As the British and their starving, freezing camp-followers set off, exultant Afghans moved in to burn the cantonments and loot baggage.



## Death in the Snow

As the mass of officers, men and panicky camp-followers gathered their possessions together to leave their cantonments in Kabul, many officers were filled with forebodings of disaster. Their commanders were, as the Afghans said, "apathetic and imbecilic"; the cold was frightful – snow had fallen thickly for three weeks and at night the thermometer plummeted to a killing 30 degrees of frost; and all feared Afghan attacks, for even after two years of occupation the Afghans were not, in the words of a contemporary historian, a people to be "awed into submission by a scattering of foreign bayonets and the pageantry of a puppet king." High in the cliffs of the passes, Afghans waited to exact vengeance.

On January 6, the forlorn straggle of humanity wound out of Kabul towards the mountains. Thousands of Indian tradesmen, surrounded by weeping wives and bellowing camels, milled round in hopeless confusion and soon destroyed any semblance of order. Afghan horsemen began to sweep in to finish off stragglers, many of whom lay frozen and apathetic waiting for death. Even the Afghan children, one officer noted, "were seen stabbing at wounded grenadiers."

On the first night, spent just six miles from Kabul, the rearguard picked its way through "a continuous lane of poor wretches . . . who entreated their comrades to kill them" – a scene repeated time and again over the next week as 2,000 to 3,000 fell aside each day to die where they fell.

**In one Afghan attack, Lady Sale (centre), who recorded the disaster, was hit. "Fortunately," she wrote, "I had only *one* ball in my arm."**

# Last Stand at Gandamak

Seven days after leaving Kabul, the last tattered survivors of the Company's army – bar a few horsemen who had ridden on ahead – reached the village of Gandamak. The 59 officers and men made easy targets: they were frozen and exhausted, and had just 20 muskets and 40 rounds of ammunition left. But the Afghans made no move to finish them off. Instead, a British officer was called out to parley and in the lull tribesmen came up and chatted to his men. Then, when the tribesmen began to snatch the men's muskets from their hands, the British forced them back and thus sealed their own fate. The Afghans retired to pick off the survivors one by one and finally, as the British fired off the last of their ammunition, closed in with drawn swords. The only officer to survive this final slaughter (below) was a Captain Souter (right of centre). who had swathed the regimental colours round his waist. Because of this, the Afghans, believing him to be worth a large ransom, took him and a few privates hostage.

A British force sallied out of Jalabad on April 1, 1842, and saved the garrison from starvation by capturing some 500 sheep and goats.

**General Sir Robert Sale, the popular commander of the Jalabad garrison, earned his nickname "Fighting Bob" by his insistence on always being first into battle and on "fighting like a private" whenever he had the chance.**

# The Struggle for Survival

The town of Jalalabad, garrisoned by General Sir Robert Sale's forces, waited anxiously for news of the retreating British troops. "You will see," prophesied Colonel Dennie, one of the officers in charge of Jalalabad, "not a soul will reach here from Kabul except one man who will come to tell us the rest are destroyed."

On January 13, 1842, a lone, exhausted horseman was sighted from the top of the fortifications. He was a military surgeon, Brydon, who had miraculously broken through three cordons of Afghans with only a splintered sword as defence. "Did I not say so?" said the quiet voice of Dennie. "Here comes the messenger."

The garrison of Jalalabad had three months of privation before a relief force arrived from India. But the spirits of the besieged remained high. Although the Afghans surrounded the town, General Sale's men made two daring forays to snatch food and guns. Their courage earned them the admiration even of Akbar Khan, the enemy's commander. And when the relief force under General Sir George Pollock arrived in Jalalabad with band playing and colours flying, Sale's garrison could still muster a band to play the old Scottish tune, "Oh but ye've been lang o'coming."

**Dr. Brydon, the only European member of the ill-fated force to reach Jalalabad totters towards the safety of General Sale's garrison.**

# *Lady Sale's Journal*

**Lady Florentia Sale (above), whose incisive journal records the "Disasters in Affghanistan," joined her husband, General Sir Robert Sale, in Kabul in 1839. She arrived with her daughter, Emily Sturt, married to a junior officer there.**

**She rapidly became notorious for her caustic comments on the British leaders, views amply borne out by the tragic events through which she lived.**

**Her diary is masterly: scathing, objective – she calls her husband, who had been ordered back to Jalalabad as an economy measure, simply "Sale" – yet with feeling for the suffering of others. These qualities remained apparently unaffected by her own sufferings, by the loss of her son-in-law and by eight months of captivity.**

**November 2, 1841:** The state of supineness and fancied security of those in power in cantonments is the result of deference to the opinions of Lord Auckland, whose sovereign will and pleasure it is that tranquillity do reign in Afghanistan; in fact, it is reported at Government House, Calcutta, that the lawless Afghans are as peaceable as London citizens; and this being decided by the powers that be, why should we be on the alert?

Most dutifully do we appear to shut our eyes on our probable fate. . . .

**November 22:** Grand dissensions in military councils. High and very plain language has been this day used by Brig. Shelton to Gen. Elphinstone; and people do not hesitate to say that our chief should be set aside. . . .

The poor General's mind is distracted by the diversity of opinions offered; and the great bodily ailments he sustains are daily enfeebling the powers of his mind.

There is much reprehensible croaking going on: talk of retreat, and consequent desertion of our Mussulman troops, and the confusion likely to take place consequent thereon. All this makes a bad impression on the men. Our soldiery like to see the officers bear their part in privation; it makes them more cheerful; but going the round at night, officers are seldom found with the men. . . .

**January 6, 1842:** We marched from Cabul. . . . All was confusion from before daylight. The day was clear and frosty; the snow nearly a foot deep on the ground; the thermometer considerably below freezing point. . . .

The progress was very slow; for the first mile was not accomplished under two and a half hours. There was only one small bridge over the Nullah, which is eight feet broad, but deep, situated about fifty yards from cantonments.

Great stress had been laid on the necessity of a bridge over the Cabul river, about half a mile from cantonments. In vain had Sturt [Lady Sale's son-in-law] represented over and over again, that as the river was perfectly fordable, it was a labour of time and inutility: with snow a foot deep, the men must get their feet wet. However, as usual, every sensible proposition was overruled; and Sturt was sent long before daylight to make the bridge with gun carriages. They could not be placed over-night, as the Afghans would have carried them off: he had therefore to work for hours up to his hips in water, with the comfortable assurance that, when his unprofitable task was finished, he could not hope for dry clothes until the end of the march; and immediately on quitting the water they were all frozen stiff. . . .

The poorer camp followers had latterly subsisted on such animals (camels, ponies, &c) as had died from starvation. The men had suffered much from over work and bad feeding, also from want of firing; for when all the wood in store was expended, the chiefs objected to our cutting down any more of the fruit trees; and their wishes were complied with. Wood, both public and private, was stolen: when ours was gone, we broke up boxes, chests of drawers, &c.; and our last dinner and breakfast at Cabul were cooked with the wood of a mahogany dining table. . . .

Previous to leaving cantonments, we must abandon most of our property, Sturt was anxious to save a few of his most valuable books, and to try the experiment of sending them to a friend in the city. Whilst he selected these, I found, amongst the ones thrown aside, Campbell's *Poems*, which opened at *Hohenlinden*; and, strange to say, one verse actually haunted me day and night:—

*Few, few shall part where many meet,*
*The snow shall be their winding sheet;*
*And every turf beneath their feet*
*Shall be a soldier's sepulchre.*

I am far from being a believer in presentiments; but this verse is never absent from my thoughts. Heaven forbid that our fears should be realized! but we have commenced our retreat so badly, that we may reasonably have our doubts regarding the finale. . . .

**January 7:** The officers of the rear-guard report that the road is strewn with baggage; and that numbers of men, women and children, are left on the

road-side to perish. . . .

We left Cabul with five and a half days' rations to take us to Jalalabad, and no forage for cattle, nor hope of procuring any on the road. By unnecessary halts we diminished our provisions; and having no cover for officers or men, they are perfectly paralysed with the cold. . . .

Snow still lies a foot deep on the ground. No food for man or beast; and even water from the river close at hand difficult to obtain, as our people were fired on in fetching it.

Numbers of unfortunates have dropped, benumbed with cold, to be massacred by the enemy: yet, so bigoted are our rulers, that we are still told that the Sirdars are faithful, that Mahommed Akbar Khan is our friend!!! &c. &c. &c.; and the reason they wish us to delay is, that they may send their troops to clear the passes for us! . . .

**January 8:** At sunrise no order had been issued for the march, and the confusion was fearful. The force was perfectly disorganised, nearly every man paralysed with cold, so as to be scarcely able to hold his musket or move. Many frozen corpses lay on the ground. The Sipahees burnt their caps, accoutrements, and clothes to keep themselves warm. . . . Sturt gave those men on duty each one glass to warm and cheer them – a comfort they fully appreciated, as they had long been without what was now become necessary, though it is in general the soldier's bane. For myself, whilst I sat for hours on my horse in the cold, I felt grateful for a tumbler of sherry, which at any other time would have made me very unlady-like, but now merely warmed me, and appeared to have no more strength in it than water. Cups full of sherry were given to young children three and four years old without in the least affecting their heads. . . .

[In the Khurd-Kabul Pass] the ladies were heavily fired on. Many camels were killed. On one camel were Mrs. Mainwaring and her infant, scarcely three months old. This camel was shot. . . . Mrs. Mainwaring took her baby in her arms. . . . Meeting with a pony laden with treasure, Mrs. M. endeavoured to mount and sit on the boxes, but they upset; and in the hurry pony and treasure were left behind; and the unfortunate lady pursued her way on foot. . . . She had not only had to walk a considerable distance with her child in her arms through the deep snow, but had also to pick her way over the bodies of the dead, dying, and wounded, both men and cattle, and constantly to cross the streams of water, wet up to the knees, pushed and shoved about by men and animals, the enemy keeping up a sharp fire, and several persons being killed close to her. She, however, got safe to camp. . . .

Poor Sturt [who had been shot in the stomach] was laid on the side of a bank, with his wife and myself beside him. It began snowing heavily: Johnson and Bygrave got some xummuls (coarse blankets) thrown over us. Dr. Bryce, H.A., came and examined Sturt's wound: he dressed it; but I saw by the expression of his countenance that there was no hope. . . .

To sleep in such anxiety of mind and intense cold was impossible. There were nearly thirty of us packed together without room to turn. The Sipahees and camp followers, half-frozen, tried to force their way, not only into the tent, but actually into our beds, if such resting-places can be so called – a poshteen (or pelisse of sheep skin) half spread on the snow, and the other half wrapped over one.

**January 9:** Mrs. Trevor kindly rode a pony, and gave up her place in the kajava to Sturt, who must otherwise have been left to die on the ground. The rough motion increased his suffering and accelerated his death: but he was still conscious that his wife and I were with him; and we had the sorrowful satisfaction of giving him Christian burial.

More than one half of the force is now frost-bitten or wounded; and most of the men can scarcely put a foot to the ground.

This is the fourth day that our cattle have had no food; and the men are starved with cold and hunger.

**January 11:** [After being taken hostage] we marched; being necessitated to leave all the servants that could not walk, the Sirdar promising that they should be fed. It would be impossible for me to describe the feelings with which we pursued our way through the dreadful scenes that awaited us. The road covered with awfully mangled bodies, all naked: fifty-eight Europeans were counted in the Tunghee and dip of the Nullah; the natives innumerable. Numbers of camp followers, still alive, frost-bitten and starving; some perfectly out of their senses and idiotic. Major Ewart, 54th, and Major Scott, 44th, were recognised as we passed them; with some others. The sight was dreadful; the smell of the blood sickening; and the corpses lay so thick it was impossible to look from them, as it required care to guide my horse so as not to tread upon the bodies. . . .

[Eight months later, General Pollock arrives in Kabul with "The Army of Retribution" and dispatches General Sale to rescue his wife and daughter and other prisoners.]

**September 19:** It is impossible to express our feelings on Sale's approach. To my daughter and myself happiness so long delayed, as to be almost unexpected, was actually painful, and accompanied by a choking sensation, which could not obtain the relief of tears. When we arrived where the infantry were posted, they cheered all the captives as they passed them; and the men of the 13th pressed forward to welcome us individually. Most of the men had a little word of hearty congratulation to offer, each in his own style, on the restoration of his colonel's wife and daughter: and then my highly-wrought feelings found the desired relief; and I could scarcely speak to thank the soldiers for their sympathy, whilst the long withheld tears now found their course. On arriving at the camp, Capt. Backhouse fired a royal salute from his mountain train guns: and not only our old friends, but all the officers in the party, came to offer congratulations, and welcome our return from captivity. 99

# II. Defeat and Retribution

There was worse to come. As the British entered the five-mile Khurd-Kabul Pass, so deep that the winter sun never reached its floor, they came under heavy attack. Akbar Khan, still protesting that he was willing to ensure the safety of the retiring army, addressed the Afghan attackers, but seemed powerless to control them. Three thousand of the refugees were killed that day.

As the survivors settled down for the third night, in the highest and coldest spot, snow began to fall again. There were just four small tents left. Elphinstone had one, two were occupied by a few wives and their children, and the fourth was for the sick – a hopeless gesture in view of the numbers of wounded, exhausted and frost-bitten wretches who had no shelter.

The next morning, before a mile had been covered, Elphinstone threw the whole column into despair by insisting on yet another halt so that Akbar could bring help as he had promised. Of course there was none. Instead, Akbar made a startling suggestion: that the wives and children should be given into his protection. They would be valuable hostages, but it seemed the only hope of saving them. Headed by Lady Sale, 11 women, some with their husbands, shepherded about 15 children up to the fort which was Akbar's temporary headquarters. There, some were overjoyed to find children that they had thought lost forever, and all were treated to a feast of mutton and rice.

The following day, January 10, saw the grimmest massacre of all. With almost all the sepoys so frost-bitten that they could not load or fire their remaining muskets, the few Europeans were the only troops able to mount any sort of resistance. Even that was hopeless, for the next defile – the Tunghi Tariki Gorge, only 50 yards long, but a bottleneck just three or four yards wide – was a gruesome death-trap.

The straggling mass of refugees was so helpless that the tribesmen no longer wasted their valuable ammunition on them, preferring to move in with drawn swords and cut the throats of their victims at leisure. The advance guard struggled through and waited for the main body. It never came, for it had ceased to exist. Nine thousand camp-followers had perished, 3,000 remained, with just 450 Europeans to lead them.

**Eldred Pottinger, Macnaghten's successor as Political Officer suggested the troops swathe their legs in rags to prevent frostbite – an idea rejected as unsoldierly.**

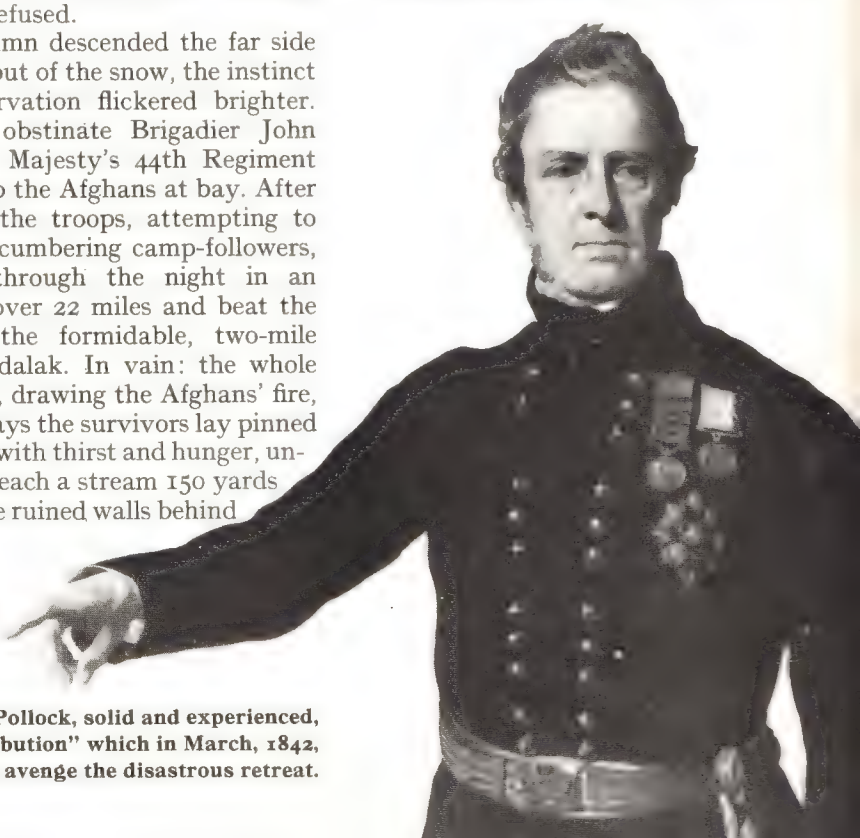
Akbar, again claiming his inability to control the snipers, said he could promise safe passage only if the Europeans surrendered. But surrender would have been the ultimate humiliation, and would probably have altered nothing. Elphinstone refused.

As the column descended the far side of the passes out of the snow, the instinct for self-preservation flickered brighter. Led by the obstinate Brigadier John Shelton, Her Majesty's 44th Regiment rallied to keep the Afghans at bay. After a brief rest, the troops, attempting to escape the encumbering camp-followers, pressed on through the night in an attempt to cover 22 miles and beat the Afghans to the formidable, two-mile Defile of Jagdalak. In vain: the whole mob followed, drawing the Afghans' fire, and for two days the survivors lay pinned down, raging with thirst and hunger, unable even to reach a stream 150 yards away from the ruined walls behind which they had taken cover. The last three bullocks were taken from the camp-followers and the Europeans devoured the raw flesh, helping down the tough meat with lumps of snow.

On the morning of the 12th, Akbar sent an offer to negotiate. Elphinstone and Shelton were regaled with food and tea, but the troops were in despair "having seen enough of Afghan treachery to convince them that these repeated negotiations were mere hollow artifices." They were right. Akbar, having apparently done his best to persuade his violent chieftains not to slaughter the remnants of the British force, refused to allow the commanders to leave.

The troops, having already lost another 100 men to the Afghan snipers, and without any message from Elphinstone, had no choice but to press on. The end was near: at the summit of the Jagdalak Defile stood a six-foot barrier of prickly holly-oak.

The infantry struggled to tear a hole in the stout branches, while bullets poured in among them. When they finally succeeded in opening a path, they were trampled underfoot as mounted officers rushed for the gap. Of the 3,500 men and women Elphinstone had left behind him, just 20 officers and 45 European soldiers now survived. The dozen or so with horses rode on ahead. The remaining pitiful force, down to a mere 20 muskets and 40 rounds of ammunition, straggled on in scattered groups, until at dawn, when they reached Gandamak, the Afghans closed in to finish them off.



**General Sir George Pollock, solid and experienced, commanded the "Army of Retribution" which in March, 1842, arrived in Afghanistan to avenge the disastrous retreat.**

Of the 12 who rode away from Jagdalak, six fell before Futtehabad, 16 miles from the safety of Jalalabad. Among the remaining six was a Dr. Brydon, who owed his survival to a self-sacrificing Indian officer: "Sahib, my hour has come," he said to Brydon, "I am wounded to death, and can ride no longer... take my horse." At Futtehabad, on January 13, the riders were tricked into accepting food from some villagers who then seized weapons, hacked two of the men to bits on the spot and set off after the other four. Three were overtaken and killed four miles from Jalalabad. Dr. Brydon remained, the sole survivor. Three times he broke through cordons of Afghan horsemen. In the last encounter, his sword snapped six inches from the hilt. Using this to parry a slash from one rider, he flung the useless piece into the face of another, and reached desperately for his reins. Apparently thinking he was reaching for a pistol, the other Afghans fled. Brydon was alone. Exhausted, slumped forward on the neck of his tottering pony, he rode slowly on into Jalalabad.

It was later suggested that he had been saved from one sword thrust by a copy of the New Testament tucked away in his cap. Years afterwards, Dr. Brydon was to admit that it had not been the New Testament, but a copy of the very secular *Blackwood's Magazine*.

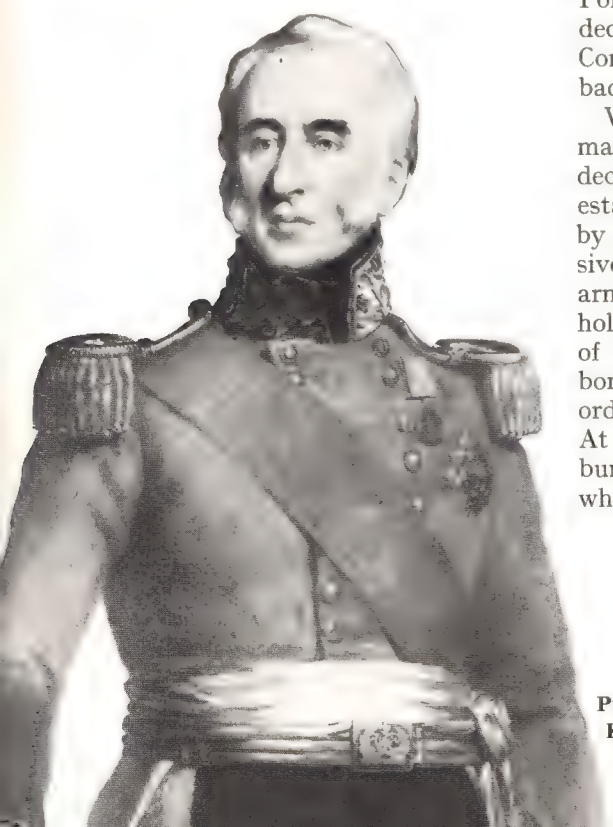
When the news reached India, Auckland pronounced the disasters "as inexplicable as they are appalling." Defeat was utter: Shuja himself had been killed soon after the British left. When the news reached England, the government fell, and after the election of a new one Auckland was replaced as Governor-General by Lord Ellenborough, who arrived to take over in February, 1842. Auckland had already taken some action. He appointed a commander, General Sir George Pollock, to the "Army of Retribution" which was assembling at Peshawar. Pollock was a man both of experience and decision who had spent 40 years in the Company's forces. Sale held out at Jalalabad, Nott at Kandahar.

**Two Afghans, clothed in their winter dress of sheepskin coats, armed with knives and rough but accurate muskets, lurk in the foothills of Khoord-Kabul Pass to snipe at British troops.**

When Ellenborough arrived, he began making sweeping, and contradictory decisions. First he called "for the re-establishment of our military reputation by the infliction of some signal and decisive blow upon the Afghans." One British army went to the relief of Nott, still holding out in Kandahar, another to that of Sale at Jalalabad. After this, Ellenborough was afflicted with cold feet and ordered an evacuation of all Afghanistan. At that point he was assailed by an outburst of indignation from the military – whereupon he ordered his generals to retire "by way of Kabul, if they so wished," thus offering them an opportunity to inflict that "signal and decisive blow." Nott and Pollock, sweeping all before them, moved on the Afghan capital. Nott arrived first, on September 17, and Pollock two days later.

There the hostages taken by Akbar were released on the payment of 20,000 rupees to their gaoler. All that was left of the army of occupation was 31 officers, 10 women, 11 children, two civilian clerks, and 52 soldiers – all British.

Nothing remained but revenge. Kabul was almost entirely destroyed, the few remaining inhabitants suffering with the buildings as "every kind of disgraceful outrage was suffered to go on in the town." At another place where the refugees from Kabul had gathered, every male past puberty was killed and many of the women raped. In the disillusioned words of one young British officer: "Tears, supplications, were no avail; fierce oaths were the only answer; the musket was deliberately raised, the trigger pulled, and happy was he who fell dead. . . . In fact we are nothing but hired assassins."



**Pugnacious General Sir William Nott, who had held Kandahar for 18 months, refused to join the retreat and evacuated the town only to join in the revenge.**

With British military prestige now believed to be restored, the Army of Retribution retired to India through the Khyber Pass. With the British travelled the family of the murdered Shah Shuja. As the army marched through the Punjab it was passed by a small band of horsemen escorting Dost Muhammad back to rule Afghanistan – a suitable epilogue to the whole unhappy affair.

In December, 1842, Lord Ellenborough staged a colossal military show at Ferozepur, 200 miles north-west of Delhi. It reassured the army of the Governor-General's high opinion, and it was thought that a display of force might perhaps overawe the Sikhs, who had been so gloatingly unhelpful in the recent troubles. An army of 40,000 troops and hundreds of guns were manœuvred in a vast area surrounded by huge marquees hung with banners and "polyglot emblazonments" of the victorious army's battles. There were triumphal arches, gorgeous uniforms, elephants, and admiring women. The troops were received by Lord Ellenborough from a throne at the centre of a five-pointed star. When the Duke of Wellington heard of it, he snorted: "And he ought to sit on it in a strait-jacket."

"Content with the limits nature appears to have assigned to its empire," declared Lord Ellenborough in one of his many proclamations, "the Government of India will devote its efforts to the establishment and maintenance of general peace." After the disasters of the Afghan War and in view of the shattered state of Indian finances, nothing could have been wiser.

But there was the problem of the Amirs of Sind. These three men had for years been reputed for their sensual indulgencies and for their cruelty towards each other and their own subjects. In the last three years, the British had broken treaty-terms, forced them to help the ill-fated Shuja and virtually annexed parts of their territory. On the basis of both their characters and of the way in which they had been treated by the British, it was impossible, Ellenborough concluded, "to believe that they could entertain friendly feelings" – even if they professed to do so.

Ellenborough was determined on a showdown in Sind. "Coming after Afghanistan," someone commented, "it put me in mind of a bully who had been kicked in the street and went home to beat his wife in revenge."

Ellenborough's instrument was Sir Charles Napier, "a small dark-visaged old man – with a falcon's glance." His instructions were precise: "If the Amirs should act hostilely, or evince hostile designs against the British forces, it was the Governor-General's fixed intention never to forgive the breach of faith, and to exact a penalty which should be a warning to every chief in India."

Technically at least, Napier was merely to ensure that the Amirs remained friendly, but he had no doubts about his real mission. "We have no right to seize Sind," he wrote before leaving to take up his new appointment, "yet we shall do so, and a very advantageous, humane and useful piece of rascality it will be."

The method was simple. A new treaty was presented to the Amirs. When they demurred, Napier advanced.

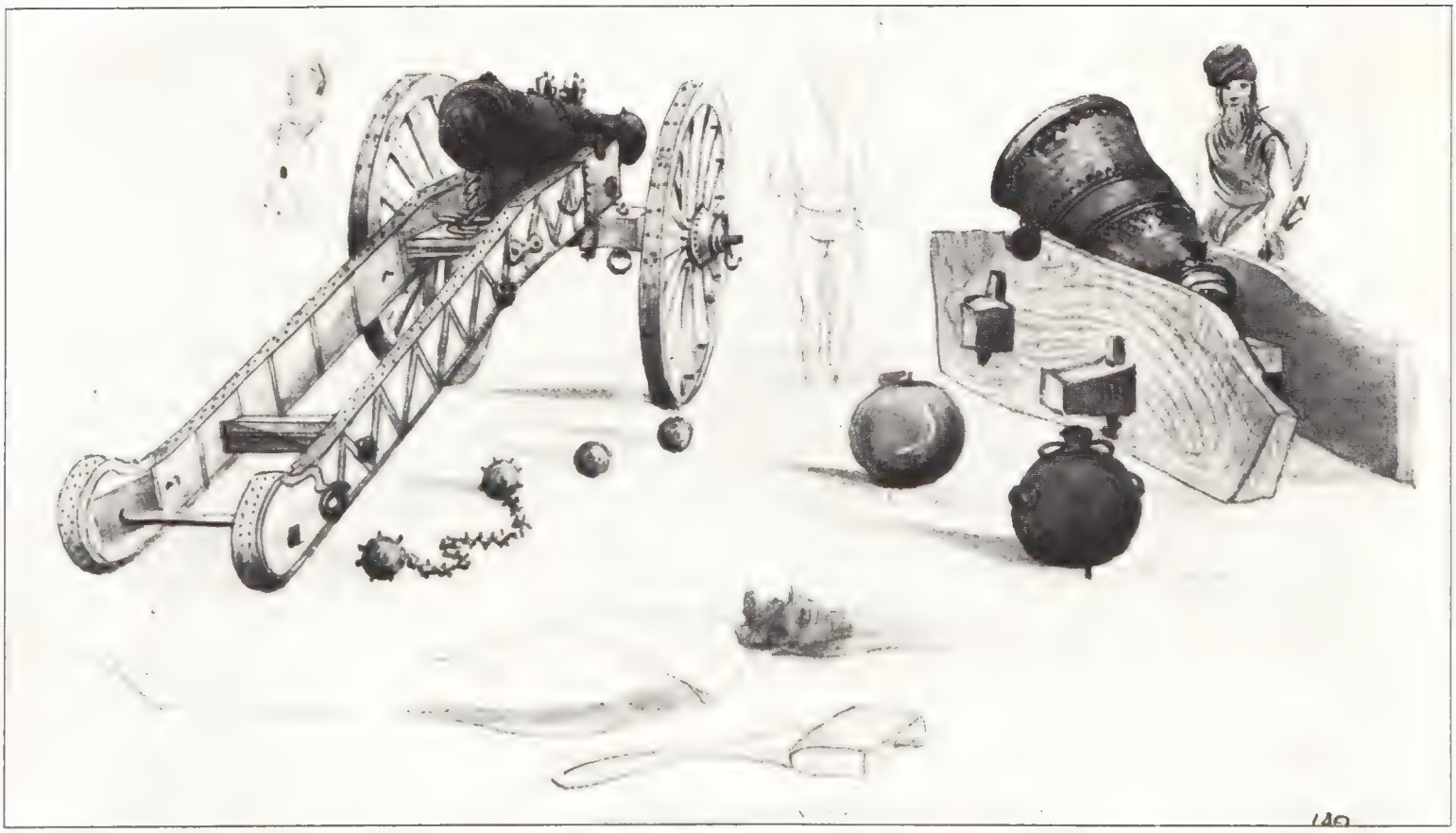
On February 17, 1843, Napier won a particularly bloody battle near the main town of Haiderabad. To the Amirs' question of what terms Napier would give them in return for surrender, he told them: "Life and nothing more. And I want your decision before twelve o'clock, as I shall by that time have buried my dead, and given my soldiers their breakfasts." One by one the Amirs gave in, recognizing in Napier a man as ruthless as themselves. Come in and submit, he told them, and if they chose not to he promised fire and sword. To one "whose barbarian pride would not bend" he sent a simple and chilling message: "Come alone and make your submission, or I will in a week tear you from the midst of your tribe and hang you."

These methods soon led to the formal annexation of Sind to the Company's dominions. Ellenborough issued yet another of his grandiloquent proclamations; Napier received £70,000 in prize-money and the Governorship of the new province. His methods hardly changed. To the chiefs he gave back their swords, with the words: "Take back your sword. You have used it with honour against me, and I esteem a brave enemy. But if forgetful of this voluntary submission you draw it again in opposition to my government, I will tear it from you and kill you like a dog."

Napier abolished slavery and the practice of burning widows alive on the pyres of their husbands. When complaints were made on the ground that it was the custom, he replied: "My nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive we hang them. . . . My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is con-

**Henry Lawrence, Resident at Lahore (left), confers with Lord Gough and Frederick Currie. This trio plotted and executed the annexation of the Punjab.**

**When Sir Charles Napier took Sind in 1843, he allegedly punned in Latin "*Peccavi*" – "I have sinned." Though untrue, the tale was an apt comment on his ruthlessness.**



**A cannon with an ornate carriage and a solid mortar were two of the prizes taken by the British when the Punjab Revolt was crushed in 1849.**

sumed. Let us all act according to our national customs." It was little wonder that he came generally known among the people as "Satan's brother."

With the annexation of Sind, British rule for the first time extended up to the North-West Frontier. Soon Napier was compelled to mount an expedition against tribes on the borders with Baluchistan, the first frontier campaign of many over the next 100 years. So far, the frontier stretched for a mere 350 miles. But to the north of Sind lay the Punjab and a frontier more than twice that length. And already events were in train which would give that important province to the British, too.

Many high-ranking British officers and administrators had made no secret of their belief that one day the British would annex the Punjab. After the death of Ranjit Singh, the Punjab had fallen into near anarchy. When civil war broke out, as the British expected, then would come the opportunity for the British to move in.

Certainly it did not look as if that time would be long in coming. A succession of maharajas and pretenders died suddenly and violently. The Sikh army took over the state, acting as king-maker and king-destroyer. Many of its leaders were in traitorous correspondence with the British, and among them was the Chief Minister, Jawahir Sigh, whose sister, the Rani Jindan, was the mother of the current Maharaja, a young boy. Enemies in the army called him to account in September, 1845, and when he appeared before them with the young Maharaja he was immediately shot down. His sister, in grief and indignation, forced her brother's two wives and three slave-girls to burn themselves on his funeral pyre. As they walked through files of soldiers, the men snatched the jewels and gifts held sacred to a suttee and tore off their ear-rings.

Even when the women were on the blazing pyre itself soldiers tried to rescue the gold fringes from their clothes. In agony, one of the women rose up in the flames and prophesied that within a year the Sikh army would be "overthrown and the wives of the men of the army would be widows." A suttee victim's last words were supposed accurately to forecast the course of events; these were to be fulfilled in a holocaust of flame and blood.

Rani Jindan, "a strange blend of the prostitute, the tigress, and Machiavelli's Prince," diverted the army's attention from her son in a way used often before and since. She pushed the army towards a foreign war. It needed little pushing, for most of the leaders believed a state of war already existed with the British. Gathered round the funerary memorial to Ranjit Singh, they declared their intentions and claimed a sure victory. Then the army moved off in the direction of Ferozepur. Surging across the River Sutlej – to the surprise of the British and of themselves – the Sikhs came to a complete halt, "An army listening in silence to the beating of its own heart"

# SEALING THE BORDER

In 1845, the Sikhs of the Punjab (see map page 507) swept into British India. Though torn by anarchy since the death of their great leader Ranjit Singh in 1839, they were temporarily united by fear of British expansion. The British, eager for control of the vast Punjabi plains, were ready. But the Sikhs proved the Company's toughest native foes: only four years later, after two bitter wars, did they finally submit.

In the first two indecisive engagements at Mudki and Ferozeshah in December, 1845, British losses were a staggering 1,200. This was largely thanks to the leadership of Sir Hugh Gough, a 66-year-old Irishman of such incompetence that he failed to make proper plans of action – but also of great charm and extraordinary bravery. At Ferozeshah, while the Sikh artillery tore hideous holes in the Britsh ranks. Gough recklessly rode up and down in a white coat to draw the enemy fire. The British were saved from total disaster only by the coming of darkness and the premature retreat of the Sikhs, withdrawn by their confused and demoralized leaders. Two months later, Gough retrieved his reputation with two overwhelming victories: a brilliant cavalry charge at Aliwal and an infantry assault at Sobraon that forced the Sikhs back into the Sutlej until that river was clogged with their shattered bodies.

**When the British at Ferozeshah advanced on the Sikh camp, they found that most of the enemy had withdrawn to fight another day.**

While the Sikh camp at Ferozeshah burns in the distance, the one-armed Governor-General, Hardinge, confers with Lord Gough, the bold but inept commander. Gough's erratic leadership had brought the British to the brink of disaster, but Hardinge's tactful advice saved the day.

At Aliwal, the 16th Lancers mounted a classic cavalry charge that scattered the Sikhs before they had a chance to deploy their cannon.

# A Triumph of Ineptitude

After Sobraon, the British advanced triumphantly to Lahore, imposed harsh terms on the Sikh leaders and occupied the country. For two years, there was an uneasy peace. Then in April, 1848, the murder of two British officers lit the flame of revolt throughout the Punjab.

At Chilianwala (below), in January, 1849, Gough was again in command and again his incompetence led to vast losses and near defeat. He chose to attack in thick jungle which effectively masked his artillery and made communication with his commanders impossible. After an afternoon of chaos, with regiments milling about confusedly in the smoke-filled jungle, the Sikhs withdrew leaving 600 British dead and 1,600 wounded, figures which appalled the British public and led to Gough's dismissal. Before his replacement arrived, however, Gough once again managed to snatch a last-minute victory. In March, an open plain at Gujrat allowed him to batter away with artillery barrages and cavalry charges until the Sikhs collapsed. The Punjab was annexed and the frontier at last secured.

British cavalry at Chilianwala clash with Sikhs in one of the ill-directed skirmishes which doomed British hopes of victory.

# III. The Rule of the Sword

There were traitors in command of the Sikh forces – a fortunate circumstance for the British, who had incompetents in command of theirs. At Mudki, the armies met on December 18, 1845. The British lost nearly 900 men, including General Sale, the defender of Jalalabad. But the Sikhs had been deserted by their commanders and were forced to retreat. Again the two forces met at Ferozeshah, three days later. The battle was the most terrible in British-Indian history. The Sikh artillery, trained by Europeans, tore into the British ranks. Guns were dismounted, ammunition blown into the air, cavalry was ripped to pieces, "battalion after battalion . . . hurled back with shattered ranks." The British commander, Sir Hugh Gough, a Peninsular veteran of incredible stupidity, had only one plan–a frontal assault with bayonets, and that in the last hour of daylight. When darkness came the confusion was almost indescribable, and commanders had no idea where their men were.

When day dawned, it revealed that the Sikhs, riddled with treachery and intrigue, were withdrawing. Observing the extent of the ruin, the Governor-General, Sir Henry Hardinge, who had succeeded Ellenborough in July, 1844, and who was present at the battle, exclaimed: "Another such victory and we are undone!" The British were desperately short of food and ammunition, and their losses exceeded 2,000 killed. In subsequent engagements, losses continued high, but the Sikh traitors had done their work well. The end came on February 10, 1846, at the town of Sobraon. The commander deserted his troops and managed to break the bridge of boats across the Sutlej. Fighting every inch of the way, the Sikhs were forced back towards the bridge and into the river which was in flood, the British guns crashing death into the struggling mass. From Sobraon the British marched to the Sikh capital of Lahore.

The peace treaty did not call for annexation, but the state was put into the hands of British officials and contingents of the army occupied strategic towns and forts. As the Sikh Treasury was empty, Kashmir was detached from the Punjab and sold to Gulab Singh, a nobleman who had remained neutral in the recent conflict, for £1,000,000. The effects of selling the Muslim people of Kashmir to a Hindu princeling are still being felt today. The British excuse was the cynical one that they needed the money. They took comfort in the reflection that the Muslim governor whom Gulab Singh replaced was just as bad. "If Gulab Singh flayed a chief alive, Immadudin boiled a Pundit to death; they are certainly a pair of amiables."

The people of the Punjab found themselves ruled by hard, muscular Christians who would tolerate no nonsense. Henry Lawrence was in charge at Lahore. To supervise the administration there was a swarm of youths who came to be known as "Mr. Lawrence's young men." "What days those were," one of them later recalled. "How Lawrence would send us off to great distances . . . giving us a tract of country as big as half of England, and giving us no more helpful directions than these: 'Settle the country; make the people happy; and take care there are no rows!' " In 1847 Lawrence gave orders for the creation of a special army unit, the Corps of Guides, which was to be highly mobile and unorthodox enough to suit the Frontier situation. Soon more were needed.

In 1848 the discontent of the Sikh aristocracy burst into revolt. The first explosion was the murder of two British officers at Multan, a town in the southwest. The government was slow to act. A new Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, had barely had time to settle in and hesitated for the first and last time in his official career. The Commander-in-Chief was still Sir Hugh Gough, advocate of cold steel against guns. Gough was in Simla, Henry Lawrence in England. But his "young men" were very much on the spot. Between them, they raised forces from among the Frontier tribesmen.

Lieutenant Edwardes, with 3,000 Pathans, marched upon the fortress of Multan, "feeling like a terrier barking at a tiger." On the way he inflicted two defeats on the rebels. The insurrection, however, spread, and at last Dalhousie acted, leaving Calcutta in October, 1848, with the remark: "Unwarned by precedent, uninfluenced by example, the Sikh nation have called for war, and on my word, Sirs, they shall have it with a vengeance."

On November 22 Gough was defeated at Ramnagar; from another minor action the Sikhs retired unbroken. When Dalhousie advised caution, Gough sat down for six weeks and did nothing at all. Then, on January 13, 1849, he fought a drawn battle at Chilianwala. He had not in fact intended to fight that day, "but the impudent rascals fired on me. They put my Irish blood up and I attacked them." The battle began at three o'clock in the afternoon with Gough flinging two infantry brigades into a dense jungle which separated the Sikhs from the British. The Sikh commander had thought of retreating but, seeing the British "panting like dogs in chase," turned his artillery on them. In the end British casualties ran into thousands, but Gough was convinced that he had won a victory. Fear of Gough's incompetence finally resulted in Sir Charles Napier being appointed to replace him. Napier, then in England, was hurried off by the aged Duke of Wellington with the words, "If you do not go, then I must." But before Napier could arrive, Gough finally allowed his artillery to do its work and, reinforced by victorious forces from Multan, won a decisive battle at Gujrat. On March 12 there was a great surrender of Sikh soldiers.

This time there was to be no sharing of power. The Punjab was annexed and those who did not like the fact were warned, in the words of John Lawrence who was soon to take over supreme authority there: "Will you be governed by the pen or the sword? Choose." Most chose the pen, but not the turbulent tribes of the Frontier. During the British war with the Sikhs, the Afghans – finding the Frontier passes undefended – reoccupied Peshawar and Attock on the invitation of the Sikhs, but gave them no other help, although 5,000 volunteers were allowed to join in the battle against the British. When the Sikhs were defeated the Afghans fled homewards through the Khyber Pass, and the British moved back into Peshawar.

The Afghans were not pursued. For the next 27 years there was to be no British intervention in the affairs of Afghanistan, though much in those of the Frontier tribes. The "Great Game," as the British called that long-standing rivalry with Russia, was beginning again on the very doorstep of the Empire.

*Master at Arms or Quarter Master, 1828*

# IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

## INTO THE DARK CONTINENT
## THE BRITISH UNVEIL WEST AFRICA